

EIGHTY YEARS OF WEDNESDAY MORNING CLUB

When Bernice asked me to write up the history of the 80 years of Wednesday Morning Club, my first thought was that I'm not an Old Roman and Wednesday Morning Club is definitely Old Rome. When I studied the current membership list I realized that most of us aren't Old Romans, so I shall speak as an immigrant with only 24 years residency - and I hope that I will inspire no hostile demonstration from the natives among us. I think it would be interesting if any descendants of the women I mention would raise their hands as I mention them.

I went to the library and got out the club files. I read the old secretaries' books and glanced through the treasurers' books. I soon gained a new and ardent appreciation of good penmanship and a passionate affection for the typewriter. We've had all kinds of secretaries from verbose and flowery stylists to terse, factual recorders - with a few stream of consciousness advocates thrown in for variety. As I read the records a picture began to immerge. The founders of Wednesday Morning Club were a pretty remarkable group of women in many ways. In 1892 they formed a group to study - to study everything, not just home problems, or local beautification, or missionaries - but world politics, philosophy, and comparative literature.

I'm not saying that they were all brilliant - they had all kinds just as we do now - but there was a core of intellectually thirsty, hard-working women who really wanted to expand their minds. In a day when higher education for women was the exception and few of them had probably had any, nothing daunted them. Some of them dug in and wrote their own papers. Others just read chapters from books or articles from magazines. A lot of them probably didn't understand it all but enough did to make the group strong and give it the momentum that is still with us. Within a few years they had around 150 members and their attendance (they kept strict records) averaged around 45-50 - so they weren't all passionate - but enough were.

In the first years they had few outside speakers, but their programs were full. In 1906, for instance, in one day Mrs. Halstead read a paper on 'King Edward', Mrs. McAdam read some articles on the Czar, Miss Marjorie Comstock read an article on the Mikado, and Mrs. Carpenter read a paper 'Comparison of the Kaiser and President Roosevelt' One morning that year they devoted to the philosophy of Nietzsche. Another morning Mrs. W. H. Van Wagenen spoke on Modern Philosophy and its Effect on Materialism, Miss Mary Evans read selections from Herbert Spencer, Miss Armstrong read a chapter from Heckel's Riddle of the Universe, and Mrs. Van Wagenen (by this time she had her second wind) read a chapter on 'Creation and Evolution' from a book on Theism. Another day Mrs. W. B. Johnson gave a paper on 'The Panama Canal', Miss Eugenie Stevens spoke on 'Atrocities in the Congo Free State', and Mrs. Cummins must have floored them all with a paper

covering 'latest developments on church and state separation in France, labor troubles in San Francisco, and school troubles in Japan'. Obviously they could not have gone into much depth in these matters when they covered so much in one morning, but they must have learned a lot. I think the best way to give you the feeling of those days is by reading part of a paper written by Mrs. Arthur T. Whyte in 1942 for the 50th anniversary - and incidentally to get acquainted with Mrs. Whyte, whom I would like to have known.

HISTORY OF THE WEDNESDAY
MORNING CLUB
By
Mrs. Arthur T. Whyte
1942

Madam President and Members of the
Wednesday Morning Club:

In the autumn of 1892, Mrs. Helen C. Bedell called together a small group of women, about 40, if my memory serves me aright, to organize a Current Topics Club. The idea appealed to us, we were of all ages, but with this in common, a desire to know what was taking place in the world around us.

At first we met in private houses, our dues were only fifty cents, later raised to one dollar and we had no associate members. Every one was expected to take part in the programs, and if a member was unable to appear, she was expected to prepare her work and have a substitute present it for her. A fine of fifty cents was assessed if she did not live up to this rule, and was sometimes collected. Names for membership were examined carefully; not in the order in which they were presented, but on the basis of what each could contribute to the Club programs. We were urged to use care in presenting names; we wanted no "dead wood"; we took ourselves and our Club seriously in those early days.

Our schedules for the year were hand written and we had no expenses until we had our first course of lectures given in the spring of 1893, when a Mrs. Richards of Newport, R. I. gave two lectures on the "poetry of the Bible." They were given at our home, 220 N. James St., where the present Post Office now stands.

We continued to meet at private houses until the city acquired the Jervis property for a library, and then, as it was somewhat unsatisfactory to meet in the homes of members, (we had increased our membership) we asked the Library Board to grant us permission to hold our meetings in one of the vacant rooms on second floor of this building. This hall in which we now meet was in Mr. Jervis' day divided into two bedrooms, each with a large clothes closet and we had for our meetings the back bedroom. It was completely furnished, the walls kalsomined in a deep shade of pink, not unbecoming to our various styles of beauty. We had no money for furnishings but asked each member to bring her own chair with name attached, and a motley collection it was too; some with sybaritic tendencies.

cies brought rocking chairs -- excellent for naps if the program proved dull, and hard on the ankles of passersby.

In September, 1896, a special meeting was held and the advisability of having honorary members was discussed and a motion made that there be honorary members. The secretary then presented two resolutions; 1st, that working members who for any reason are unable to do their work may remain as honorary members without having a vote upon payment of a fee of \$5.00. 2nd, that persons not members may become honorary members, if elected by the Club, upon payment of \$5, the whole number of honorary members to be restricted to ten (10). The honorary list of that day, as you probably understand, is our present associate list.

We had learned that the front chamber of this building was not in use, and on October 21, 1896, we discussed the matter of enlarging the club room; the matter was put to vote to be decided by a two-thirds majority, permission to remove partitions to be asked of the Library Board, "the expense" I quote "to be kept strictly within the means of the Club." The motion was carried.

At the annual election in April of 1896, several absent members sent in sealed votes, but on October 28th of that year, exception was taken to votes sent by absent members, the legality of the election was questioned and it was moved and seconded that in the future no member be allowed to vote unless present. At that meeting, a letter was read from the Library Association giving permission to the Club to make the proposed changes in the room and when I tell you that our active membership was 60 and our associate 10, you can realize what such an undertaking meant. We got out a Jervis Library Calendar in conjunction with the Library Board, paid half the expense of printing and had half the profits. This money was used to buy a table for the Club rooms, and the money in our treasury together with gifts from Mrs. Elizabeth Stryker Butler of Detroit and Mrs. Hetty Wardwell Soper of New York, both native Romans, enabled us to complete the change, put draperies at the windows and matting on the floor, thus, as the secretary tells us "beautifying the hall."

In December, 1897 the hall was opened and presented to the Library Association. We still, however, continued to use our harlequin set of chairs. Many years later, we received permission to put in the window at the side for the hall was a gloomy place on a dark day when the light came only from the windows at the front and back. New members have sometimes expressed surprise that the Library Board allowed free use of this room for our meetings, but you can now see why. At a time when the Association had little help from the city, we made it possible for them to have a hall which could be used for their own purposes, and which has been used by many groups; thus from the very first we benefited not only ourselves but the whole city.

In those early days we continued our meetings until the end of June (our calendar gives the final date as June 27th) and in 1897 we were so devoted to the Club that we voted to continue informal meetings throughout the summer. The idea was all right, but the summer was hot and we "frail children of dust and feeble as frail" came at last to the conclusion that it was wiser to end the year in the spring. Later it seemed advisable to end it in March. We were great for experiments; one year we tried meeting in the afternoon because many housewives complained about having to spend the morning away from home. They said they would never miss a meeting if we would change the time; we did, and they missed just the same and, as it seemed incongruous for a Wednesday Morning Club to meet in the afternoon, we went back to the old time.

1897 was a great year. We increased the active list to 65. At that time the names for membership were voted upon by the entire Club. We elected an executive committee of four persons to act with the president on all matters not necessary to be brought before the whole Club. We raised the dues to \$2.00. We shortened the name Wednesday Morning Current Events Club to Wednesday Morning Club and we joined the State Federation of Women's Clubs.

As I have said, our first year books were written and when later we had money enough to have them printed, we had no set design for the cover. In 1898 Mr. George Ethridge, represented in our membership, designed and gave the monogram which we still use for our books. 1898 was also the year when we voted to have three vice presidents instead of one.

in 1904-05 I was made chairman of the music section, an appointment which I refused to accept unless some money went with it. Previously our musical programs were furnished by local talent, and while excellent, you see I was often in them. I was a contralto; we had heard everyone over and over again, and as usual I wanted something different. The Club voted me \$50. I heard that the Olin Mead Quartette, an attraction of first rank in the chamber music field, was about to give a concert at Hamilton College. Miss North, one of their members, is a cousin of Miss Comstock, and because of this fact, the quartette agreed to come to Rome for \$100 and entertainment. I was on the executive committee of the St. Cecelia Club, long since disbanded, and I induced them to go in with us (they voted me \$25) so with courage and the aid of good friends, I undertook to present them.

Dr. Peabody let us have the Baptist Church auditorium, we to pay for janitor service and lighting; and Mr. A. C. Kessinger was generous with newspaper space. Every member of each Club had to have a ticket and for the first time they were not transferable. We wrote the name of each member on the back of her ticket, which caused one of our members to call upon me and tell me it was outrageous; she could not attend and wanted to

give her ticket to a friend. So I offered to buy a ticket for her--they cost fifty cents.

When the evening came, the auditorium was crowded and we took in enough money, in spite of our large paper - to pay all expenses and return all of the money with a slight addition to each Club. Our share was \$56.88. Lincoln MacAdam was the soloist on the program.

In the course of our long career, we have touched upon almost every subject except calories and vitamins and even so we did give Domestic Science a glance. I well remember a paper prepared by Mrs. Harry Lake in which she said that after reading the woman's page in various magazines, she had about decided that no woman could be a true wife and mother unless competent to prepare a full course meal, daintily served with the aid of a soup bone and a few cold potatoes.

As long ago as 1905, we debated the following question; "Is unionism at the present day a force for good in the United States?" I mention it because of the curious record of the secretary. The judges gave the decision to the affirmative side, but then a vote by ballot was taken of the Club and the Club gave it to the negative, so all were satisfied. I remember it for I was on the negative side.

We spent a morning discussing the difficulties the west coast was having with its large Japanese population and reviewed many articles setting forth the views of Californians on the subject.

Early in our history we decided not to discuss politics or religion. We tried both topics, but they led to so much acrimonious debate (many people, you know, take everything personally) that it seemed safer to omit them. In this connection I must tell you that some twenty years ago, Mrs. W. B. Reid, Miss Comstock and myself found ourselves on a committee for a morning. It was a presidential year, and our chairman, not a native Roman, suggested that we talk on the political outlook. We told her of this unwritten rule and she said she thought that wouldn't matter for she believed the Club members were largely Republican as no persons of importance were Democrats. Whereupon all three of us sat up straight in our chairs and said in unison, "I am a Democrat;" it was then, as I remember that we turned with relief to the Japanese problem in our western states.

We have studied sociology, science, art in all its forms, painting, architecture, sculpture, music, the drama and poetry, both old and new. We have delved into the political economy of Germany, Russia, and America. We have given much time to the literature of various countries. Nothing daunted us for in 1899-1900 we took for the year's work "Outlines of Evolution and four of Shakespeare's plays, Midsummer Night's Dream, Richard III, As You Like It and Hamlet". A glance at the old year book will give you some idea of the amount of study which was required, for we had no outside speakers at those meetings.

We have devoted time to the study of India, China, Japan, many South American countries, Canada, England, Scotland, Italy, France, our own Colonial history, Russian literature and undoubtedly some subjects I have forgotten-- and always current topics, our original subject. On May 1, 1901 we restricted the length of office to two consecutive years that all might have opportunity to serve.

I do not mean to insinuate that all of us were highbrow--far from it for many of us had our "off moments." I remember having a call from one of our members one Wednesday afternoon. I had missed the morning meeting and had neglected to look at the program so when my caller spoke of the meeting I asked her for the subject. She said it was a review of a book written by Gibson. I could not think of anyone but Charles Dana Gibson and said, "Why, I didn't know he had written a book. What was it about?" She said, "I didn't get much out of it-- it was something about a doll."

I think, too, of a woman who prepared excellent papers which she said she always wrote at night when the house was quiet, and then about one or two o'clock she woke her husband and read her article to him. "Does he like it?" I asked. "Why, no" she said, "but I've got to have an audience."

somewhere along the road we raised the dues to \$3.00, but I cannot find a record of it; however, I remember how annoyed some of our members were. They didn't feel that the programs were worth such a vast sum, but we wanted money for good lectures and entertainments and so the day was carried.

We have had one honorary president, Miss Mary L. Bissell, the office created for her in 1091, and in 1908 my aunt, Mrs. Louise M. Duffy was made an honorary life member. Both of these women had been valuable members for many years and had done much to make the Club a success. Each had prepared many interesting papers on all manner of subjects, so when taken ill and no longer able to be active, it was the Club's method of recognizing their past work.

The flowers on the desk each morning are in memory of Mrs. Clara P. MacAdam, a former president, greatly beloved by our members. In 1928 she was struck by a car while crossing from one side of James Street to the American Corner, never regained consciousness and died the next day.

Our Christmas Carol program is carried on in memory of Miss Mary Champion, who first started and continued it for some years.

We have from time to time given money to worthy causes outside of our Club interests, and although we are primarily a literary Club, our purpose, as so tersely put by our constitution is "intellectual improvement." We shall, I am sure continue to do so.

We have brought many notables to Rome, and while some like Cornelia Otis Skinner, Amelia Earhart, Mary Ellen Chase and Mary Lamberton Becker spoke at our annual

luncheon, an occasion reserved for Club members only, we have on the whole been generous in sharing our opportunities with the general public.

We have presented such outstanding persons as Jane Adams of Hull House, Ernest Thompson Seton, Vachel Lindsay, Carrie Jacobs Bond, Zona Gals, Madam Nairdu, the disciple of Ghandi, Randolph Churchill, son of Winston Churchill, Roy Chapman Andrews, Edward Tomlinson, Beatrice Herford, Carl Carmer, Carl Sandburg, John Temple Graves, Richard Benton, Richard Halliburton and many others of equal prominence and all of these lectures and entertainments have been available to the public. The Wednesday Morning Club has made for itself an established place in the life of the city.

Madam Nairdu, the Indian woman, spoke in the basement of the Baptist Church. Her talk, even at that time, was straight anti-British propoganda and she had a habit of scratching her head while talking, which made a most unpleasant impression.

In conclusion, let me say that I have been on the active list all these years and in times past had much to do with the work of the Club. I started the mornings on modern poetry, and have, at widely separated periods, had the honor of serving as your president from 1905 to 1907 and following the death of Mrs. Bacon in the early thirties as I was first Vice-President. I again presided and was made President the succeeding year.

Let me thank you for your patience in listening to this sketchy resume of our fifty years; it is in no sense a complete history. I have merely given you a few facts and have skipped lightly over many points. I have enjoyed refreshing my memory, even if it has made me feel that Dominick Lynch, who laid out the village of Rome, must have been my contemporary, and so with the hope that the Wednesday Morning Club may be going strong at the end of the next fifty years, I will bid you good morning.

That is quite a list of speakers who were enticed to Rome - we surely can't compete with that record in late years - but an interesting sidelight is the speakers who evidently didn't impress her and whom she forgot to mention. There were William Lyon Phelps, Robert Frost, Will Durant, William Rose Benet, Alfred Noyes, and Louis Untermeyer. When Robert Frost spoke in the old Presbyterian Church chapel in 1925 they paid him \$120 to read 'Mending Wall', 'The Road Not Taken', 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', and 'Birches'. Carl Sandburg, Amelia Earhart, Carl Carmer, and William Rose Benet got \$100, Will Durant and William Lyon Phelps \$125, Cornelia Otis Skinner and Randolph Churchill \$150, and Richard Halliburton and Roy Chapman Andrews \$176 - which ought to prove the eternal popularity of the adventure story. After Mrs. Whyte's paper Lillian Clippinger was president in 1944 when Emily Kimbrough spoke for \$175 and in 1943 when

Margaret Bourde-White got \$250!: For many years the club put most of their resources into one speaker of real renown and handled the other meetings themselves.

One interesting note - in 1914 they had a lecture on the Montessori system of education.

The membership has always been a fluctuating list - much of the business of the executive committee has always been concerned with receiving and discharging members. I'm not sure why this was when the active participation of the members has never been really enforced - there has always been a lot of dead wood on the list. Members join and quit and join again - and from the records you can't tell why. Even Mary Champion - she of the Christmas carols - quit for a year. Perhaps those acrimonious political discussions that Mrs. Whyte mentioned had something to do with it.

In the 1920's some familiar names begin to crop up. In 1922 - just 50 years ago - Sally Kent, Betty Evans, and Alice Riley are on the list. It's hard to tell just when Louise Williamson joined. The lists are not at all consistent in their use of 'Jr.' and I don't know if Louise had a resident mother-in-law. In 1924 Sally spoke on Stephen Leacock, and Betty on the novel of social problems and social reactions.

In the 1930's long lists of members were dropped for non-payment of dues. There was a trend to more programs by area professors and fewer member mornings. As the small fees for professors began to add up there were fewer widely known speakers on the agenda. In a way it is too bad that the study and hard work of the early members has given way to such a degree to the passive listening that characterize so many of our meetings - but I suppose it was inevitable in our busy modern world. On the other hand, a professor usually knows more about his speciality than the average Wednesday Morning Club member - however intelligent.

As we get into the years that so many of us remember it is hard to single out individual programs - there have been so many excellent ones. I shall mention only a few of my personal favorites. Sally Kent and Louise Kingsley have delighted us time after time. The string quartet was a treat for several years. Dr. Jonathon Kistler jostled our brains. My favorite single talk was Dr. Louis Jones and his 'A nosegay of Pretty Murders' about Cooperstown. Our field trips have taught us a lot about our area. I especially remember our trips to the Everson Museum, the deaf school, and the Mansion House of the Oneida Community.

In January of 1968 we moved the meeting place here to the Tudor Room of the Art and Community Center. I'm sure we all enjoy these more gracious surroundings without the thumpings and the rattlings of the fluorescent lights that we used to get at the library as people walked upstairs.

The record of the Wednesday Morning Club's first 80 years is a good one. It

has been a definite factor in improving the cultural climate of Rome - an intellectual oasis in the sometimes deadly monotone of our lives. We have been blessed with many educational opportunities denied to women in 1892. I hope that we can keep our intellectual standards as high as theirs were.